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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000344

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SUBJECT: FM OSKANIAN SKEPTICAL OF TURKISH INTENTIONS WITH
AKTAMAR CHURCH OPENING, OTHER INVITATIONS

Classified By: CDA A.F. Godfrey, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: FM Oskanian told us March 21 that a deputy culture minister would lead the GOAM's delegation to the Aktamar church opening March 29. He said the Catholicos would also send representatives of the Armenian church from Echmiadzin, as perhaps would the Armenian Patriarch in Istanbul. He was disappointed that Turkey had not been willing to open the land border to admit the delegation to the event, as both a practical help and a political gesture of goodwill. Oskanian said there was considerable political pressure on the GOAM not to send anyone to the ceremony, which was widely seen by Armenians as a cheap Turkish publicity stunt, designed to subvert world attention from the "genocide" issue. Oskanian editorialized at some length that he personally, and President Kocharian even more so, were "more and more convinced" that Turkey wanted nothing more than endless, empty process with Armenia. "If we were even ten percent convinced that this process will lead anywhere, we would do ten times more" to make it successful.
END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) THE AKTAMAR CHURCH EVENT: FM Oskanian affirmed that the GOAM will accept Turkey's invitation to send a delegation to the reopening ceremony of the Armenian church on Aktamar Island in Lake Van, but that this would be led by deputy minister rather than the minister of culture herself. This was a political compromise, threading a middle course between demands (especially from the Armenian diaspora, but echoed in local sentiment) to boycott the ceremony altogether, and the need not to spurn a Turkish invitation altogether. Oskanian commented that the politics were complicated further by the ongoing dispute between the Armenian Patriarch in Istanbul and the GOT over whether Turkish authorities would permit a cross to be mounted atop the renovated church and whether the Patriarch's clergy would be permitted to conduct worship services there at least once or twice a year. Oskanian said it was not yet clear whether the Armenian Patriarch would be represented at the ceremony, and the GOAM was reluctant to allow daylight between its position and that of the worldwide Armenian church. The foreign minister cited a recent California Courier editorial (a leading voice of the Los Angeles-based diaspora community) denouncing the Aktamar church reopening as "Turkish propaganda."

¶3. (C) THE POLITICS OF LOGISTICS: Oskanian expressed disappointment that Turkish officials had not chosen to open the border to allow the GOAM/Armenian Church delegation to drive to Lake Van. This would have been a valuable political symbol. It also would have been a great logistical help, transforming a 14-hour trek the long way around into a direct, four-hour drive. Alternatively, the delegation may have to fly to Istanbul from Yerevan, and then get onward transportation back east to Lake Van, which was also cumbersome. This was a missed opportunity on Turkey's part to show some goodwill.

14. (C) OTHER INVITATIONS: The CDA raised several additional Turkish invitations to GOAM officials (reported to us by Ankara e-mails), including the BSEC summit in late June, a Turkish chamber of commerce/BSEC event for trade ministers, and the reported recent invitation to an early April conference from Bilkent University in Ankara to Armenian Minister of Finance and Economy. Oskanian reported that he himself would likely represent President Kocharian at the BSEC summit. It was not yet clear who would attend the trade event or an education-related event to which Armenia had also been invited, because the events will occur so soon after the Armenia's May election that those cabinet seats may not be filled yet. (NOTE: We were told separately by Deputy Finance Minister Avetissian that the finance minister had never received anything in writing from Bilkent University. END NOTE)

15. (C) EMPTY PROCESS: Oskanian commented that he and his government were "more and more convinced" that Turkey had no intention of letting this process of apparent rapprochement lead to anything substantive. He added, "the president is even more pessimistic than I am." Armenian leaders are convinced that Turkey's strategy is to placate Western leaders by creating the appearance of an active dialogue with Armenia, while never conceding anything that adds any value for Armenia. Oskanian said that if he believed there was even a ten percent chance that this dialogue with Turkey was leading anywhere, he would multiply his government's efforts ten times to get to a result. He does not even demand immediate results; If he were convinced that dialogue now would lead toward a border opening in 2008 or 2009, that would be fine. However, he simply did not believe that the GOT was serious in its negotiations.

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16. (C) BEEN THERE, DONE THAT: Oskanian commented that Armenia has numerous times before acceded to American wishes and engaged in bilateral dialogue with Turkey, each time letting Turkey get past an immediate problem in exchange for promises that progress would come down the road for Armenia, and every time the GOAM had ultimately been left empty-handed. He related that in 1998, Armenia had withheld consensus for Turkey to host the 1999 OSCE Summit. Then-Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott had personally pleaded with Oskanian to lift the Armenian veto of the Istanbul site. Talbott had said "I promise you that in a very short time you'll be able to drive through that border. I'm looking you in the eyes and making that commitment." Armenia did relent, and lift its opposition to Turkey hosting the 1999 Istanbul Summit, and yet no one insisted that Turkey fulfill Talbott's commitment to get the border opened. More recently, Oskanian added, DFM Kirakossian's attendance at the funeral in Istanbul of Hrant Dink earlier this year was cited by the U.S. Administration in a letter from Secretaries Rice and Gates to Congress as evidence of an ongoing process of reconciliation. But Kirakossian attended not at the invitation of the Government of Turkey, but in response to urging from the USG. Skepticism in Yerevan, accordingly, runs deep, that the promises Turkey makes when on the horns of an immediate political problem, will reach fruition. GODFREY